

# From Kpóvos to Xpóvos: Time, Humour and the Hindu-Muslim Puppet.

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## Introduction

The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it [the reaction] will be credited or discredited.<sup>1</sup>

As we know, all the world is a stage. Goffman in his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* makes it clear that societies function by humans constantly changing their ‘persona’ to make their performances in various social situations *genuine*. Morality remains important but it is compromised by our need to convey a genuine impression to those around us. A universal morality becomes second to the ‘morality’ of fitting the scene. Islam, it seems, seeks to redress this problem. It denigrates the performative to the point where *dar-al-Islam* has been seen at times as a land without theatre, a land devoid of performance. Thus the pre-eminent Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges is able to quite plausibly drag us into the Southern Spanish world of the great philosopher Averroes (Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198) and to ‘dramatise’ this issue. Borges pictures this famous philosopher in a struggle with his translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The conundrum is that in a world without theatre how could one translate a work on tragedy? A companion to the philosopher then tells a bizarre tale brought back from the Far East by Muslim merchants,

One evening, the Muslim merchants of Sin-i Kalal conducted me to a house of painted wood in which many persons lived. It is not possible to describe that house, which was more like a single room, with rows of cabinet-like contrivances, or balconies, one atop another ... [at the front] some fifteen or twenty who wore crimson masks prayed and sang and conversed among

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<sup>1</sup> Erving Goffman, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth, 1971) 245.

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themselves. These masked ones suffered imprisonment, but no one could see the jail; they rode upon horses, but the horse was not to be seen; they waged battle,<sup>2</sup> but the swords were of bamboo; they died, and then they walked again.

The incomprehension of the listeners to this tale seems more plausible for not only in *dar-al-Islam* were performances rare, but in Europe at this time theatre barely existed. When another companion to the philosopher exclaims: 'the acts of madmen are beyond that which a sane man can envision' we are ready to believe that in the western hemisphere a thousand years ago, performance and the theatrical were conundrums beyond the ken of the 'known world'. We may believe that, despite the incredibly bloody passion plays on the subject of the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandchildren in Shi'a Islam, the Muslim world today remains a land without performance. Most interestingly it is to Asia that Borges must send his Muslim merchants, only here in the exotic East, as the author suggests, theatre never died. This brings me to the crux of this paper. How can the performative element of Asian society find accommodation when Islam becomes the dominant element of religious discourse? Many commentators have examined this issue from an historical perspective. Inspired by Garry W Trompf and his focus on the place of the construction of *time* as a vital social and religious element,<sup>3</sup> I would like to concentrate on theatre and Islam in Indonesia. Here Javanese shadow puppetry (*Wayang Kulit*) sits in an uneasy alliance with Islam. I would like to propose that examining the place of time and recurrence can allow for a new schema for reading this Javanese entertainment as a *Muslim* manifestation.

Pre-Islamic Arabia was in no way devoid of theatre and performance. Tribes would meet and promote their poets. The ability of one poet to challenge another in the imagery of his verses and the dexterity of his metre would bring significant prestige to that tribe. Poets in Arabia (like puppet masters in Java) would also serve as soothsayers and healers. It is at this level that they resented competition to

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<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph*, trans Andrew Hurley (London, 1998) 73-74.

<sup>3</sup> Garry W Trompf, *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought* (Berkeley, 1979) 116-179.

Muhammad, who needed to define his prophethood as something outside this tradition. It is not surprising then to find that when the *Qur'an* came to be pronounced, it made a clear distinction between its divine poetry and poetry in general. In Sura LXIX 41-42 we read 'This is not the word of a poet, nor of a soothsayer'.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Muhammad suggested that good poets were good because they deceived their listeners with beguiling lies; he noted that the famous Ibn Al-Qays was so good that he would lead all the other poets into hell.<sup>5</sup> Additional proscriptions on depicting visual images remain strong in the Islamic tradition if more ambiguous in the *Hadith* or the reported sayings of the prophet. Peripheral statements suggest that image-makers such as painters shall burn in hell.<sup>6</sup> These proscriptions have not halted the arts in Islam, but they have created a line of tension between representational art and the great act of creativity that Allah engaged in to create the world. It is this tension that plays itself out constantly in *dar-al Islam*.

### The Cultural Context of Wayang Kulit

This is also the case with *Wayang Kulit*. Numerous sources have addressed the history of this performative art.<sup>7</sup> Its status, in this scholarship, has moved from being considered simply a cultural remnant from a time when the influence of India brought Hindu tales to the islands of Indonesia, to a sophisticated site of cultural discourse that is a vital and complementary corollary to Islam. This is based on the way *Wayang* has integrated itself as an inextricable dimension of the ritual life of Java. Although the issues of pre-Islamic 'remnants' and their (occasionally) fringe status has been dealt with in regards to

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<sup>4</sup> *The Noble Qur'an*, trans Al-Hilali and Khan (Medina, 1983) 782.

<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *Reorientations: Arabic and Persian Poetry* (Bloomington, 1994) 43.

<sup>6</sup> *The Sahih Muslim*, collection of Hadith, 24, 5272 archived at <http://www.iiu.edu.my/deed/hadith/muslim/index.html>, accessed 25 October 2007.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Laurie J Sears, *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (Durham and London, 1996). Jan Mrazek (ed) *Puppet Theatre in Contemporary Indonesia: New Approaches to performance events* (Michigan, 2000).

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other non-Islamic rituals/performances,<sup>8</sup> what I would like to do below is examine, through the issue of time, how *Wayang* works as a vital part of Javanese society in an entertaining and fascinating tension with Islam. It produces, as Sears puts it, a

Continually unfolding local and unstable relations of power constitute narrative traditions like wayang tales as sites of contestation and accommodation in the search to hear new voices of authority.<sup>9</sup>

Javanese understandings of time have a significant role to play in this process.

With a comprehension of cycles of time, overlayed with Islamic linear time, the sophisticated understanding of time in Java is woven through a *Wayang* performance. To explain how this weaving of times is done, and how the cultural, artistic and religious dimensions of *Wayang* best interrelate, I like to use the following metaphor: in a timepiece the centre wheel, the bezel, and the escapement, all come under the governorship of the balance wheel.<sup>10</sup> It is this essential cog that turns the tightly-wound and spasmodic thrusts of the spring into an ordered and understandable reading. The danger of not knowing the time (that is the danger of lacking an orientation point in the face of social change) is abated by the governing order placed over a great deal of the uncontrollable tensions of the moments in which the drama of *Wayang* takes place. As this governing force *Wayang* helps its audience face the tensions of myriad social dramas in the way Victor Turner speaks of them, and resolves these tensions into its own solution for social order.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The clearest example being Abdellah Hammoudi's description on pre-Islamic chaos festivals in Morocco, *Le Victime et Ses Masques* (Paris, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> Sears, *op cit*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Although here the link between theatre and clockwork is nothing more than an effective analogy, is it mere coincidence to discover that one of France's greatest playwrights is also one of the central figures in the development of Western timekeeping? See for example the first chapter of Jean-Pierre Beaumarchais's biography of his ancestor in *Beaumarchais: Le Voltigeur des Lumières* (Paris, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York, 1986) 102ff.

It was with great interest that I recently returned to watch several video tapes made of *Wayang* performances in Sydney, with a focus on the performances of 9 August 1995, completed in the performance space of the Centre for Performance Studies at the University of Sydney. The *dalang*, or puppet master began *in media res*. A battle is on. Arjuna, hero of the *Mahabharata*, is on the right side. He is calm. He flutters up into the sky, his movements are full of grace. With gentle flicks of his hand, slight and delicate but firm gestures, Cakil the slathering hulk of a monster is sent reeling by the hero. Just as it is Cakil's nature to fight Arjuna, it is Arjuna's duty to dispassionately and effectively rid the world of this ogre. The *dalang* raises the puppets up off the screen for a moment. Our eyes wander the white screen waiting for their reappearance. With the hand movements of a prestidigitator, the *dalang* has the characters back on the screen running at each other. The *gamelan* orchestra arrayed around the room pumps out a thunderous sound. The fight continues. Cakil continues to fight low, Arjuna is on top of him, increasingly in the ascendancy.

With several decisive blows, Cakil reels backwards. The *dalang* lets go of the arm rod which is attached to Arjuna's puppet-arm. The *dalang* flicks it in such a way as to make it look like a great sword piecing the bubbling, excessive flesh of the monster. Blow after blow comes crashing down on Cakil's head until the monster is caught. Arjuna and Cakil are frozen in the middle of the screen, Arjuna dominant. The stillness is quite beautiful; we know that Arjuna has won, he always wins, but the placement of the puppets together in this way – frozen together in time – has many resonances. The *gamelan* is still working at full pace. The *dalang* picks up the *kayon* – a highly coloured screen – and this flutters down over the two combatants. The movement of the *kayon* is also a signal to the orchestra and the music slows, the scene ends.

In this battle one could say that Arjuna was embodying the very essence of the *Mahabharata* as espoused in the *Bhagavad-gita*. For it is here that Krishna says to Arjuna,

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Offer to me all thy works and rest thy mind on the supreme. Be free from vain hopes and selfish thoughts, and with *inner peace* fight thou thy fight.<sup>12</sup>

Cakil is a thing of the forest, uncivilized, bestial and instinctual. One might argue that the sheer force of nature that Cakil represents delineates an entire axis of the unformed, the uncivilized and the uncanny.<sup>13</sup> Arjuna, on the other hand, embodies the quintessence of noble, caste-appropriate action as defined in the Indian epic. In light of this it is interesting to note the interplay between left and right and up and down. Arjuna never leaves the right hand of the *dalang*, Cakil never leaves his left. Also, as I noted, Arjuna is kept above his enemy.

The idea of high and low is also illustrated by the clowns. Before the battle scene, some clowns sauntered in. In the presence of Arjuna, the chief clown Bargon made a number of jokes. The subjects for humour range from the number of lovers and wives Arjuna keeps (and how he sometimes forgets he is married), to being silly enough to lock himself out of his room, to jokes about having long hair and not being able to buy rice around 'here'. Many of these jokes are in the stilted English of Suyanto, who as *dalang* had not been long in Australia. It transpires later that all these jokes related directly to the 'here' of Australia. The joke about forgetting wives relates to the *dalang's* stay in Sydney away from his family. After the performance we hear that he locked himself out last night, which was what prompted that particular joke. The reference to long hair was made because Suyanto had made a vow not to cut his hair until his English had improved. Furthermore, for Suyanto, good rice was hard to find in Sydney.

It may be beside the point to note these things but the immediacy of the performance in Sydney could not be kept out of the overall performance. During a *Wayang kulit* performance the 'theatre' can be divided into three distinct 'latitudinal' spatial areas. Before the screen or *kelir* is the 'official' audience area. In this area the audience watch

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<sup>12</sup> *Bhagavad-gita*, trans Juan Mascaráo (Harmondsworth, 1986) Chapter 3, Verse 30, 58-59; emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans David McIlintock (Harmondsworth, 2003) 121ff.

a screen onto which puppet shadows are projected. Then there is the screen area comprising the *dalang*, puppets, screen and light source. Between the screen and the cross-legged-sitting *dalang* are set banana trunks. Into these trunks the rods of the puppets can be wedged, holding one puppet momentarily while the *dalang* operates another. Suyanto writes, 'The banana trunks also have a symbolic meaning as land, because all *Wayang* puppets stand upon the banana trunks'.<sup>14</sup> This symbolic meaning is carried on to the screen itself which is 'called *jagadan*, meaning the world'.<sup>15</sup> Behind the screen to the back of the *dalang* sits the *gamelan* orchestra. Behind and to the side of the orchestra sit the 'unofficial' audience. This highlights the irony that is *Wayang kulit*: although the view from the 'official' audience area presents the puppets as dark shadows on a lit screen, it is the 'unofficial' audience who are allowed to see the *gamelan* and *dalang* in action as well as the glorious colour of the puppets. The 'unofficial' side makes for a better show.

There is also a 'perpendicular' division in a *Wayang* performance. 'Generally those [puppets] associated with the good are arranged on the right side ... While the evil or bad characters are arranged on the left'.<sup>16</sup> Peacock suggests that this division flows through to deeper cosmologies at play. He makes a direct link to ceremonies of circumcision. '... among the sycetists [that is, the "nationalists" as Suyanto calls them below], the circumcision ceremony itself is traditionally rich in symbolism signalling the presence of both male and female elements: it is (or was) celebrated by the performance of a shadow play, whose screen is divided into left and right sides, probably associated with female and male halves of the cosmos'.<sup>17</sup> Peacock's argument is based on a quite a big 'probably', nevertheless this 'longitudinal' division is suggestive of deep fissures within the

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<sup>14</sup> Bpk Suyanto, *The Setting of the Javanese Wayang* (unpublished MS) Sydney University, Centre for Performance Studies, 1997, 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> James L Peacock, 'Symbolic Reversal and Social History: Transvestites and Clowns of Java' in Barbara A Babcock (ed) *The Reversible World* (Ithaca, 1978) 221.

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human brain. In 1909 Robert Hertz wrote in *The Pre-eminence of the Right Hand*,

Society and the whole universe have a side which is sacred, noble and precious, and another which is profane and common: a male side strong and active, and another, female, weak and passive; or, in two words, a right side and a left side ...<sup>18</sup>

There is, of course, the taboo nature of the left hand in both the Muslim and Hindu worlds. It is a division that seems to pervade the entire matrix of Indo-European thought.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, there are other reasons behind this division for we face a multitude of times as well as sides in the operation of *Wayang*.

A performance itself runs through the night, from about nine in the evening through to just before, or sometimes after, dawn. Sleeping, eating and leaving for urination and defecation is all quite normal (for all except the *dalang* that is). To musical accompaniment the *dalang* arranges the *lakon* or story, moves the puppets, speaks and sings the narration. He uses various signals to cue the *gamelan* so that this traditional orchestra are aware of spontaneous changes in the *lakon*. The task of *dalang* involves much more than this, but it is little wonder that he or she (predominantly 'he') is considered a superhuman and is often approached by people seeking out his or her assumed shamanic abilities.

## **Weaving Time(s)**

Arnold Becker treats time as a phenomenon set upon a microcosmic/macrocosmic axis. He speaks of differing times/epistemologies; that is, whole worlds (either mystical or historical) which within themselves must be governed by differing times.<sup>20</sup> I will refer to these time/epistemologies in this manner. In the

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Shirley Ardner, *Women and Space* (Oxford, 1993) 5.

<sup>19</sup> See, 'Cosmology: Polarity and Direction' in J P Mallory and D Q Adams (eds) *The Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* (London, 1997) 130-131.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold Becker, 'Text Building, Epistemology, and Aesthetics in Javanese Shadow Theatre' in *The Imagination of Reality* (New Jersey, 1988) 29.



end Becker chooses to see *Wayang* and its variant forms of *fabulae* through the highly appropriate English word ‘coincidence’. To understand this term of ‘coincidence’ more extensively we should keep in mind how time is dealt with in Central Java. Clifford Geertz<sup>21</sup> explains the calendar system of Indonesia comprising of five, six and seven day name cycles that operate to determine ‘... all the holidays, that is, (all the) general community celebrations ... These do not appear, however, in any discernible overall rhythm’.<sup>22</sup> This ‘permutational’ calendar indicates when days of ritual and carnival are to take place and it does so by the coincidental clash of different name day cycles and so forth. It finds a parallel in the Islamic lunar calendar that shifts through the solar year less by coincidence than slippage.

Becker then divides language into two categories of time. ‘All language activity, including literature, involves, then, variation between spontaneity (present) and repetition (past)’.<sup>23</sup> As a form of communication this bifurcation of time in language also applies to *Wayang*. It is composed of a number of traditional skills of communication – sub-languages within the performance. Behind this tradition is an extensive and lifelong form of training. ‘Becoming the character ...’ for an Asian actor, states Zarrilli, ‘... epitomises (1) the lifelong process of training’ [let us call this the sub-language of *repetition*] ‘and (2) the immediate psychophysical process of engaging in performing (doing) the acts which constitute a performance on any given occasion’ [let us call this the sub-language of *spontaneity*].<sup>24</sup> As far as the sub-language for the domain of repetition is concerned a *dalang* (this puppeteer-come-conductor) must be trained in all the conventions of *Wayang* and embody a super human ability to demonstrate a talent in all these conventions. Once the *dalang* has mastered them (over years at the hands of a master) he

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 225.

<sup>22</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Person Time and Conduct in Bali* (Yale, 1966) 46.

<sup>23</sup> Becker, *op cit*, 215.

<sup>24</sup> Phillip B Zarrilli, ‘What does it Mean to Become the Character: Power, Presence and Transcendence in Asian In-body Disciplines of Practice’ in Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (eds) *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual* (Cambridge, 1993) 139.

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or she can begin to rearrange them. In fact it is expected that a *dalang* will be able to master tradition in order to break from it. As Sears says of more experimental Javanese puppetry 'If they break the rules it is because they know the rules so well'.<sup>25</sup> The time spent in training manifests itself in performance through the dexterity of the *dalang's* puppetry and also in the number of sub-languages he or she has mastered.

Entering into the realms of the religious, the *dalang*, a practising Muslim, must also be cognisant with the pre-Islamic myths of Java and have mastered the Sanskrit of the 'imported' Hindu myths of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (I moderate 'imported' because these myths are both clearly Indian and dearly owned by the Javanese). At the 9 August performance I attended, the *dalang* demonstrated a profound working knowledge of Sanskrit, one of *Wayang's* main conventions. Although the clowns of *Wayang* can speak any language they choose, and remonstrated with the audience in English slipping often into Javanese colloquialisms, they are the only characters who *can* do so. In fact one could argue that the tools of the *dalang* include 'the entire history of the literary language, from Old Javanese, pre-Hindu incantation ... adding Arabic and colonial elements'.<sup>26</sup> Foley believes this is part of the mystery of *Wayang*, 'the *dalang's* equivalent of charms and formulae ... are those passages in the play which are in Kawi'.<sup>27</sup> – a language whose source continues to baffle linguists. If we accept Becker's belief that the audience are considered the 'non-essential' observers, then it follows that Kawi is spoken for the benefit of the 'essential observers' – the gods. By being versed in the languages of repetition (the incantations of tradition and of past) the *dalang* can invoke older times and epistemologies summoning them into the present.

The use of music in *Wayang* seems to confirm this. Music is a communication with another time. In one of the stories presented in

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<sup>25</sup> Laurie Lobell Sears, 'Aesthetic Displacement in Javanese Shadow Theatre', *The Drama Review*, Fall, 1989, 131.

<sup>26</sup> Becker, *op cit*, 232.

<sup>27</sup> Kathy Foley, 'Of Dalang and Dukun - Spirits and Men: Curing and Performance in the Wayang of West Java' *Asian Theatre Journal* 1: 1, 1994, 65.

the Centre for Performance Studies archive ‘Ruatan’ the human-eating Kala is pacified by, of all things, a lullaby. ‘The *dalang* here intones the first of a series of mantra, called *kidung*, chanted to a tune which is said to draw together place spirits’.<sup>28</sup> That is, the music has ‘effect’ on other times unseen by those present. It is a ‘lullaby’ that has a history back to the rhythmical chanting of sutras and even further back. (Foley continually refers to music as a development of ‘mantra’). From the 9 August performance it was clear that the *dalang* (through the clowns) might ask a *pasinden* (a female singer) to sing. Possibly the song will be contemporary. The music will remind the audience of recent events, conjure memories recently felt, the immediate nostalgia of those present will be played with. The newer song will then sit against a background of highly formal singing and religious en-tone-ment. Alphonso Lingis has considered music as an ordering and an extension of the ever-bubbling murmur of the world. Lingis invokes the studies of J M G Le Clézio who spent time amongst the Indians of the Chiapas and their music which is a ‘... music with which they see, hear, and feel in the anaesthesia of the night’.<sup>29</sup> The comparison is moot as the performances of *Wayang* and its songs go through until the light of the new morning. Lingis quotes Le Clézio directly; ‘Melodious music is first the conviction that time is fluid, that events recur, and that there is what we call “meaning”’.<sup>30</sup> By this association the language of meaning and time in *Wayang* works to convene a sense of the ‘now’. This sense of the ‘now’ is coming into an order – as gaining meaning. The introduction of contemporary popular songs helps to create an even stronger sense of the ‘now’. And such music is a microcosm of the event of *Wayang*. Just as various multi-day calendars in Java need to coincide before a day for performance can be set, so too do the gongs, drums and cymbals of the *gamelan* orchestra play out in beat patterns of differing value that see the music created. *Wayang* is often its own vehicle of comparison. The *dalang* is a translator of language, and a comparer of times both musically, mythically and otherwise; times

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<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*, 59.

<sup>29</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington, 1994) 99.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, quoted from J M G Le Clézio, *Haï*, Skira, Geneva, 1971, 51-512.

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that randomly and purposefully clash. Yet to translate times and compare them as he or she does the *dalang* must excel not only in the languages of tradition but also in the languages of ‘improvisation’.

Though the above sub-languages are necessary for the composition of a *Wayang* performance it is how the sub-language of ‘improvisation’ manages these languages (and times) that give eventual structure to the ‘meaning’ of the performance. In *Cueing the Gamelan*, E L Heins catalogues the various means by which the *dalang* may inform the musicians of his or her intent while he or she also achieves the near-impossible feat by keeping the puppets against the screen and voicing their words and the narration. Most obviously this communication takes place by the beating in various codes but there are many subtler ways to indicate to the rest of the team the direction of the fabula.<sup>31</sup> What these various signals allow is the ability of the *dalang* to instantaneously choose the direction of the performance. The 9 August performance was repeated to demonstrate that the *dalang* could deliver two performances which had the same basic formulae of plot, yet were startlingly different in content. This ability, or rather compunction, to ‘choose’ direction allows the structure to remain familiar to the audience (for it is a repetition of past traditional sub-languages) yet still allows the contents to be composed of more unfamiliar recent times.

As events of the *Mahabharata* passed between the hero-gods and the monsters they faced, more recent events were spoken humbly, jokingly, and exclusively through the mouths of the clowns and servants. These figures represent an axis of personalities on this stage quite distinct from the Indian heroes. As Woodward writes,

The appearance of [the character] Semar as being ambiguous in his gender, the juxtaposition of his obesity and crude manner with Arjuna’s physical beauty and refined manner results in a situation of contingent juxtaposition from which arises a sense of unification of humanity.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See, <http://cip.cornell.edu/Dienst/UI/1.0/Summarize/seap.indo/1107140692>

<sup>32</sup> Mark R Woodward: *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (Tucson, 1989) 223-4.

What was most interesting about the 9 August performance was that the talk of the clowns was about being in Australia and about visiting the university. Elsewhere the *dalang* is under the influence of a much different social environment. At Ann Arbor Richard Schechner observed and recorded a similar ‘dislocated’ performance of *Wayang* which fitted into another tradition of inviting *dalangs* to American campuses. Thus Schechner needed warn his audience of how in the West particular ideas of *Wayang* have come about through years of ‘colonial’ influence and the creation of a ‘normative experience’.<sup>33</sup> *Dalangs* and their Western audiences are no doubt influenced by this. Moreover *dalangs* are under varying amounts of political pressure. Whether that pressure be from old colonial distortions of the perception of, and the history of, *Wayang* or the influences of the defunct LEKRA (Institute of People’s Culture, whose intention was to reform the interpretation of *Wayang* so it could ‘fulfil the needs of the Sukarno led revolution’<sup>34</sup>) or the agenda of the current regime. In one *Wayang* script a conversation between the clown/servants *Limbuk* and *Cangik* made reference to an upcoming election (1977) and (*Cangik*) warns her daughter not to let herself be influenced (by those rumour mongers disturbing the peace). This and a number of other recorded *Wayang* performances were openly political.<sup>35</sup> *Dalangs* can also include issues of community concern. In the scene previous to the one quoted above the hero King Dhastharastra speaks to his adversary King Pandu, the clowns translate: ‘You should only have as many children as you can afford’. This message of family planning comes from a character who is prestigious because of his many sons. Though this seems a contradiction, the important issue is that such concepts appear in the drama at all.

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Schechner, ‘Wayang Kulit in the Colonial Margin’, *The Drama Review*, Summer, 1990, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Sears, *op cit*, 132.

<sup>35</sup> Victoria M Clara van Groenendaal, *The Dalang behind the Wayang : the role of the Surakarta and the Yogyakarta Dalang in Indonesian-Javanese society* (Dordrecht, 1985) 165.

## Conclusion

*Wayang* has been openly pressured by Muslims, the Dutch, the Communists and the Militarists. It is full of jokes about Australia when it is in Australia, or about America when at Ann Arbor. It is a vehicle for community issues such as family planning (despite mythical ideas of many sons as prestigious). All this is because the *dalang*, being able to ‘choose’ through the sub-language of improvisation, creates another time/epistemology – the time/epistemology of the ‘now’ as it bounces off the representations of other times and finally finds its place beside or within them.

Becker adds, ‘the time within *Wayang* is unconstrained, except that it must be multiple’<sup>36</sup> but what Becker does not say is that the ‘now’ once it is enunciated, in the form of political, social, humorous or religious comments, becomes one of these multiple times. The old time/epistemologies of tradition are set up so that the improvised ‘spontaneous’ creation of the ‘now’ epistemology can be in some way compared with it. Thus, *Wayang* is clearly a liminal space in the Turnerian sense. On the idea of times meeting, Turner writes that social drama can be about,

... a question of one [older] cultural rule opposing [a newer] other. Man’s ‘original sin’ perhaps, is the plurality of equally valid rules he imposes on himself. This proves man’s status as an evolving life form.<sup>37</sup>

This is partly true in the case of *Wayang*. But *Wayang* is not about the simple resolution of social clefts, (not in one time/epistemology anyway) it is about the deferral of present meanings in the face of re-invoked pasts. Old times, old traditions, old meanings are by their status as ‘tradition’ in some way given to balance. These pasts presented in a performance are forever coming into in some kind of randomly arranged but strongly present order. The ‘now’ is not. It is dangerous because it is not. Dangerous, here, strongly in the sense that Douglas speaks of it, a danger that foreshadows social chaos. Until aspects of the ‘now’ – the contemporary life of those present –

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<sup>36</sup> Becker, *op cit*, 226.

<sup>37</sup> Turner, *op cit*, 100.

are put into language by *Wayang* it remains chronologically unspoken. The 'now' is a timepiece without a balance wheel unkempt and tense enough to tend to the greatest violence. The *Wayang* creates and brings the 'now' into the play to show it order, to show it balance. Thus when the great hero Arjuna and the formless Cakil meet, one acting with panache close against the screen and well defined, the other holding back from the screen and so blurring its shadow, '... two worlds two epistemologies coincide for a moment ...'<sup>38</sup> This is emphasised in the remarkably refined, although stylised, forms of the hero puppets.<sup>39</sup> The result of the battle is that Cakil is subdued (not killed). He will return to be subdued again. In these battles 'No one ever wins conclusively, but rather a proper balance is restored'.<sup>40</sup> And by coincidence this balance is introduced to the conflicts and torments of the 'now' for the sake of order.

Until its meaning is enunciated, compared and deferred the 'now' is out of time – it is outside the Javanese idea of cosmological coincidence. It is out of place. Mary Douglas refers to dirt as 'that which is out of place'<sup>41</sup> and dirt can mean the transgression of taboo – the entry into the dangerous. Her work with models of purity and danger (based on a close reading of *Leviticus*) has a very appropriate application to Muslim Indonesia. Kathy Foley, in examining those *dalangs* who are also *dukuns* (spiritual leaders) lists a number of dangerous or taboo transgressions which can be cleansed by the person under a *pamali* (curse) by hiring or attending a *ruatan* ceremony. In this drama the *dalang* acts as the liminal middle-ground between the taboo and the cleansing, between the nasty Kala (whose name literally means 'time') and the hero Bantara Guru, between purity and danger. Generally in *Wayang*, it is the 'now' which is unclassified and out of place. *Wayang* removes the danger, purifies it by bringing the new and unfamiliar into time and language.

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<sup>38</sup> Becker, *op cit*, 219.

<sup>39</sup> A common wisdom associated with *Wayang Kulit* is that the stylization of the puppets out of an immediately recognizable human form is in deference to the Islamic uneasiness with idols, images and the human form. It could well be that *Wayang Kulit* simply developed its own aesthetic model.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

<sup>41</sup> See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London, 1966) 41-58.

‘Kpóvos’ is the deity of an older pantheon. He is the ruler of a ‘golden age’ an age of metallurgical purity. ‘Xpóvos’ is the deity of time; time personified.<sup>42</sup> The phonetic and conceptual *différence* in these two names underlies this essay’s point. *Wayang*’s composition in performance invokes a series of past time/epistemologies, coming, through its battles and banter, into an ordered, pure, *balanced* world. Like Kpóvos and Xpóvos social concepts of time are inexorably meshed about this invocation of language as myth. This is the touch stone of all traditional Central Javanese *Wayang*. To get to this philosopher’s stone one must be conversant with an immense number of sub-languages; training, voice work, puppetry, gamelan music, conducting, cueing, Sanskrit, Arabic, Kawi and so on. These sub-languages allow a communication with these other, older time/epistemologies. The binding of the performance, of these required traditions, is by means of improvisation – introduced through the languages of communicative signs that allows the structure (the traditions) to be open to coincidence. This is the nature of ‘improvisation’ in the religious necessity of *Wayang*. This ability for adjustment allows the entry of the present. The ‘now’ time/epistemology is introduced to the balanced traditional time/epistemologies. Improvisation thus facilitates coincidence and coincidence is *kebetulan*, but this word also means ‘truth’. Truth that not only operates in *Wayang* – but as we have seen – in the coming together of the various day cycles that make up the Javanese calendar and dictate the ‘when’ of social ritual. It is a truth that emerges from performance and one which remains dependant on the meeting of times: a chronological congress. And I suggest a comparative reading of popular Western art forms through this paradigm would net some equally fascinating results.

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<sup>42</sup> See the entries for ‘Kronos’ and ‘Chronos’ in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 2003).